

Stretching gives the body a more fluid form because it lengthens muscles rather than building bulk.

> "People love to spout statistics: how many kilometres they've run, how many kilocalories they've burned. So they treat stretching as something that doesn't count," says supermodel Elle Macpherson.

Having long been a jogging devotee, Macpherson is someone who has now re-evaluated her exercise regime to incorporate stretching.

nerve in the back of my leg. I went to a chiropractor who said I wasn't flexible enough. So I started stretching.

"Now, I put all my clients through a series of stretches before they do any training at all and they haven't had any injuries yet. You must stretch.

"I've been stretching for two years now and I'm a lot smaller but the muscle that I have now is much better

and stretching. Consequently the technique is popular with the city's professional dancers and athletes.

"If you are working to strengthen a particular muscle," says Menezes, "you should follow with something to stretch the muscle to stop it bulking out and to keep the joint loose. It is important to combine weights and lengthening to keep strength and to have elongated

the gym anymore ... here, no-one cares what you look like or what you wear."

Busy people can also be more time efficient with their exercising if there is someone looking over them, forcing them to concentrate. □

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"At one time I was exercising so much I couldn't even touch the ground, and I could barely lift my arms above my head. My body felt bulkier, less fluid," admits Macpherson. Now that she is stretching Macpherson says, "As I've gotten more limber, my body has developed a more feminine quality."

Continued repetitive movements, the type of exercise often encouraged in gyms, create bulk in the main muscle groups. This actually shortens the muscles, decreasing their flexibility.

According to Lyle Micheli, associate professor of orthopedics at Harvard Medical School, "Short, tight muscles are more apt to tear. Stretching helps guard against sports injuries."

"Not only are people with low functional flexibility more easily injured in everyday life, but they lose their capacity for movement more quickly. If you get stiff and sore every time you do something, eventually you'll stop doing it."

A living example of this is personal fitness trainer Glenn Kirk of Australian Personal Training, a former Mr. Australasia runner-up. At the peak of his training, Kirk says his movement was so restricted he felt "like an old man".

"When I was heavy, I couldn't touch my toes; I used to get a sore back just lying in bed. You look big and strong, but your muscles are so tight ... Then I pulled a

quality. It looks a lot better because of the stretching. And I feel a lot better."

Now he is persistent when the people he is training try to skip the stretching exercises before they start their workout. "I would rather cut a bit of weight training out than cut the stretching at the start."

This is a big admission from someone who still believes that weights are the most effective way to change the shape of a body. But, of course, this means using weights in conjunction with stretching.

Not only does stretching warm up the muscles before exercise, therefore helping to prevent muscle injury, it also helps give the joints mobility, lessening the chance of injury to them as well. Then there are the advantages of longer, leaner looking muscles (the look that most women want), flexibility and fluid motions.

The suggestion is not that everyone should give up all other forms of exercise and devote themselves exclusively to stretching. Rather that stretching should be incorporated into any fitness regime. It is not good enough for a runner to spend 30 seconds leaning over to loosen his legs before running for an hour; or for a person to skip the warm-up before an aerobics class and then leave before the cool down afterwards.

At the Body Control Studios in Sydney's Bondi Junction and Crows Nest, Allan Menezes instructs people in the Pilates technique, which combines strengthening

muscles. With Pilates, you don't need to do two different exercises to do this."

This kind of exercising is a long way from the Eighties aerobic boom, where people flocked to classes in Lycra creations thinking that three sweat sessions a week would give them the perfect body.

"If you are doing aerobics," Kirk explains, "you get the heart rate up, you work your cardiovascular system, you feel good and the muscles feel good but they won't actually change their shape."

Both Menezes and Kirk emphasize the importance of concentration if you are serious about re-shaping your body. It is important to do the exercises carefully and correctly, concentrating on specific muscles.

"Going to the gym becomes a peer pressure thing," says Menezes. "It's all about sex; boys looking at the girls, girls looking at the boys, etcetera. It's full of distractions like loud music, so people don't concentrate."

Kirk warns that a lack of concentration can be dangerous. "The first thing that happens with a lack of concentration is injury for one, and you also get no benefit from the workout. It is important for someone to think about the muscle they are wanting to work."

This is where the trend for personalised instruction comes into its own. "The idea of a supervised workout is a totally new era in exercising," says Menezes. "The baby boomers have grown up, they don't want to go to

LEAN STRONG AND LONG

Stretching
doesn't
mean a
sacrifice of
strength.